Aegidius

“King of Soissons” (461 - 464/65)

BRIEFING

Aegidius (died 464 or 465) was the ruler of the short-lived Kingdom of Soissons from 461 to 464/465. Before his ascension he was an ardent supporter of the Western Roman emperor Majorian, who appointed him *magister militum per Gallias* ("Master of the Soldiers for Gaul") in 458. After the general Ricimer assassinated Majorian and replaced him with Emperor Libius Severus, Aegidius rebelled and began governing his Gallic territory as an independent kingdom. He may have pledged his allegiance to the Eastern Roman emperor Leo I.

Aegidius repeatedly threatened to invade Italy and dethrone Libius Severus, but never actually launched such an invasion; historians have suggested he was unwilling to launch an invasion due to the pressure of the Visigoths, or else because it would leave Gaul exposed. Aegidius launched several campaigns against the Visigoths and the Burgundians, recapturing Lyon from the Burgundians in 458, and routing the Visigoths at the Battle of Orleans. He died suddenly after a major victory against the Visigoths; ancient historians say that he was assassinated, but do not give the name of the assassin, whereas modern historians believe it is possible that he died a natural death.

After his death, he was succeeded by his son Syagrius, who was the last ruler of the Kingdom of Soissons.

EARLY CAREER

Aegidius was born in Gaul, a province of the Western Roman Empire. It is believed that he came from the aristocratic Syagrii family, based upon the name of his son, Syagrius. While this evidence is not absolute, modern historians consider a connection to the family likely, by birth or marriage. Aegidius served under Aetius during the latter's time as *magister militum* (master of soldiers) of the Western Roman Empire. He also served alongside the future emperor Majorian.

Aegidius was either a founding member of Majorian and Ricimer's faction, or else he quickly joined it, wielding considerable influence with Majorian. After Majorian became Western Roman emperor, Aegidius was granted the title *magister militum per Gallias* in 458 as a reward for his loyalty.

DEFENSE OF GAUL

The Ripuarian Franks conquered Cologne and Trier from the Romans c. 457, and Aegidius was besieged in Arles by the Visigoths under King Theodoric II for a time in 457/458, before Majorian defeated him. In the same year, Aegidius led troops at the Battle of Arelate against the Visigoths, where he is credited by ancient sources as being the primary cause for Theodoric II's defeat.

As a result of the battle, Theodoric II was forced to return Visigoth territory in Hispania to the Western Roman Empire and submit again to being a Roman vassal. Aegidius also recaptured Lyons from the Burgundians in 458.

After Ricimer assassinated Emperor Majorian in 461 and replaced him with Libius Severus, Aegidius refused to recognize the new emperor. Libius Severus was not recognized by the Eastern Roman Emperor Leo I, who was considered the senior emperor. Aegidius may have pledged his allegiance directly to Leo I in order to legitimize his independence from the Western Roman Empire, and his retention of the Gallic legions.

Aegidius repeatedly threatened to invade Italy; however, he never did so. Modern historian Penny MacGeorge has suggested that this was due to pressure from the Visigoths, whereas others assert that he was unable or unwilling to march to Italy, leaving Gaul exposed.

WARS WITH GERMANIC KINGDOMS

Around this time war had broken out Aegidius' lands and the Visigoths, over borders, and Aegidius was said by Priscus to have distinguished himself in the fighting. It is known that during this time, Ricimer ceded Lyons to the Burgundians, and Narbonne and most of Narbonensis Prima to the Visigoths, in exchange for alliances. Ricimer probably appointed a replacement for Aegidius, despite the fact that Aegidius retained most or all of his Gallic forces. The two people most likely to have been given the title of *magister militum per Gallias* (master of soldiers in Gaul) were the Roman general Agrippinus, whom Aegidius had previously accused of treason, or the Burgundian King Gundioc, who was Ricimer's brother-in-law. Around this time Aegidius sent embassies to the Vandal king Gaiseric, probably in an effort to form an alliance to oppose Ricimer.

According to a story known to Gregory of Tours and the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, the Frankish King Childeric I, who controlled much of northern Gaul, was exiled at some point after 457, and the Franks then elected Aegidius to rule them. The ancient sources go on to say that Aegidius ruled them for eight years before Childeric was recalled and reinstated as king. This story is considered fictional by most modern historians. Another narrative given by primary sources is that Childeric formed an alliance with Aegidius, although this has slim historical evidence, and is directly opposed by archeological evidence, which supports the theory of the Kingdom of Soissons, the historiographic name given to territory ruled by Aegidius and his son Syagrius, containing the expansion of the Franks. Ernst Stein suggests that the Franks may have placed themselves under Roman rule in the absence of Childeric. Michael Kulikowski posits that his *comitatenses* (armies) were so heavily Frankish at this point, that he could fairly be remembered as a king, rather than general.

Aegidius repulsed an invasion by the Visigoths in 463, routing them at the Battle of Orleans. In this battle, Aegidius' forces killed the Visigoth general Frederic, who was the brother of Theodoric. Some sources say that Aegidius' forces were bolstered by Frankish forces. Aegidius also won a minor engagement against the Visigoths near Chinon, at an unknown date. Despite these victories, he did not take the offensive against the Visigothic position in Aquitaine, possibly due to lack of resources, or due to threats from *comes* (count) Paulus, Gundioc, and the Western Roman generals Arbogast and Agrippinus. He sent a diplomatic party to the Visigoths in May 464, which would not return until September of that year.

Battle of Orleans

The Battle of Orléans took place in the year 463, between the Kingdom of Soissons, under the command of the *magister militum* Aegidius, and the Visigoths, commanded by the Visigoth King Theodoric II and his brother Federico.

Aegidius, who had proclaimed the secession of the northern part of Gaul in 461 after the assassination of Emperor Majorian by Ricimer, a magister militum of Germanic origin who wanted greater control over the Western Empire. Ricimer installed what he hoped would be a more easily controllable emperor, Flavius Libius Severus Serpentius, a move that backfired as he was not recognized by a few of the provinces or by the eastern half of the empire.

Aegidius, having been stripped of his title by Ricimer, threatened to attack the Italian Peninsula with his considerable army. The Visigoths, sensing an opportunity to extend the frontier of their northern kingdom past the Loire River which was the contemporary boundary of their empire, and having been encouraged by Ricimer to attack the Alans, then allied to the Romans, to deflect their attention away from Italy, mobilized their army for an attack. The two armies met at Orléans in 463. The conflict ended in a costly defeat and rout of the Visigothic army and the death of their commander, Federico, the brother of Theodoric II.

This defeat halted for some time the ambitions of the Visigoths with respect to this northern region of Gaul. This was fortunate for Aegidius and the Roman rump state as they were also being constantly harassed by the Saxons under Odoacer. This Visigoth timidity ended with the Roman provocation at Battle of Déols where a Romano-British invasion army under Riothamus was defeated by the Visigoths from 470-71.

The existence of this battle is referred to in various texts throughout the ages:

- Hydatius: *Adversus Aegidium comitem utriusque militiae, virum, ut fama commendat, Deo bonis operibus complacentem, in Armoricana provincia Fretiricus frater Theuderici regis insurgens, cum his cum quibus fuerat, superatus occiditur.* (*Chronicle*, 218). Of note, Hydatius places this battle in the year 461, missing from his account any data for the years ranging from 462 to 464.

- The *Chronica Gallica of 511*: *In the fifth year of the reign of Leo I the Thracian* [which took place around 461-462] *Fredericus frater Theuderici regis pugnans cum Francis occiditur iuxta Ligerim.*

- Marius Aventicensis: [During the councilship of Basil and Vibiano of 463] *His consulibus pugna facta est inter Aegidium et Gothos inter Ligerum et Ligericinum iuxta Aurelianis ibique interfectus est Fredericus rex Gothorum.*

- Also, Gregory of Tours (II, 18) refers to the fighting in which the king of the Salian Franks, Childeric I had participated in during those years. Most modern historians have come to the conclusion that Aegidius had Frankish troops in his service and that Childeric was either a Roman ally or client during this time. That being stated, there is no concrete proof to affirm that there Childeric had been present, nor of the alliance between the two groups.

DEATH

Aegidius is recorded to have died suddenly, in autumn of 465. Sources of the time report that he was either ambushed or poisoned, but do not mention a perpetrator. Most modern historians consider it possible that he died a natural death, although some, such as Kulikowski, challenge this. After his death, he was succeeded by his son Syagrius. Syagrius is reported to have moved his seat of government to Soissons, which would later give Aegidius and Syagrius' breakaway government the historiographic name of the Kingdom of Soissons. The Franks defeated Syagrius and captured Soissons in the 480s.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Aegidius was referred to by numerous titles in primary sources, many of which were contradictory. In the *Historia Francorum* by Gregory of Tours, he is twice called *magister militum* (Master of Soldiers), although Gregory describes him as being elected *rex* (king) of the Franks. Even more confusingly, Gregory does not give him any title while mentioning his death. The *Liber Historiae Francorum* refers to him initially as *rex*, but later twice calls him *principem Romanorum* (the Roman emperor). In the 'A' version of the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, he is called *Romanorum rex* (King of the Romans) at the time of his death, while the 'B' version calls him *Romanorum tirannus* (Roman tyrant), implying that he was a usurper. The *Chronicle of Fredegar* calls him *comes* (count). Based on the two references from the *Liber Historiae Francorum* which refer to him as emperor, and the occasional usage of the title of *rex* to refer to an emperor, some have asserted that he was in fact an emperor, although this is based upon shaky evidence, and is considered very unlikely by most historians. Modern historians give three possibilities for his actual status: The first possibility is that he declared himself king, and was called such by both his own kingdom and external barbarians. The second is that he was never called king within his own lifetime, but later folk or epic traditions gave him the title. The third is that he was referred to by a Roman title by his subjects, but called *rex* by barbarians, as it was analogous to the titles of their own rulers.

Information regarding his place of birth and his son comes from Gregory of Tours, the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, and the *Liber Historiae Francorum*. His service with Majorian under Aetius is related by Priscus, who also mentions his subsequent influence with Majorian as emperor. His elevation to *magister militum per Gallias* is given by Gregory and Hydatius. The loss of Cologne and Trier is provided by the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, and his encirclement in Arles by Paulinus of Périgueux's *Life of St. Martin* and Gregory. His accusation of treason against Agrippinus, whom he accused of surrendering the empire to barbarians, is known from the *Vita Lupicini*, which calls the claim maliciously false. Priscus also states Aegidius' refusal to recognize Libius Severus, and his threats to invade Italy, and he and Gregory speak to the conflict between Aegidius and the Visigoths. His continued dispute with Agrippinus and the Battle of Orleans is granted by Hydatius, Marius Aventicensis, and Gregory. The envoy he sent to the Visigoths is spoken of by Hydatius alone. Hydatius and Gregory both give the narrative of his death, and Gregory relates that he had invoked the help of St. Martin of Tours while in danger. Paulinus praises his bravery, character, and piety.